

We are all newcomers to the land

This is a community often defined by whether you are a local or a newcomer, whether your roots run many generations deep in the land or just a few years.

But these categories are never clear. I have neighbors who moved here 20 or 30 years ago who talk about more recent residents as “newcomers.”

Indo-Hispanos here for over 400 years are relative newcomers among Native peoples who have lived continuously in the Southwest for thousands of years. But other Native cultures in the region immigrated here from Alaska and the Pacific Northwest not long before

FOR THE LAND



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Coronado made his way from the south in 1540.

My family first came to New Mexico in 1695, not to mention all the genizaro and other Native blood that has sifted in over the centuries. However, I was mostly raised in Denver and lived all over the West before returning here 16 years ago, so how local am I? And my wife and half of my son's blood come from another part of the world.

When it comes to the land — to really understanding its long-term rhythms and human impacts and ecological change over time — I would say there are very few of us who are truly local.

Everything moves so much and so fast in our modern age, including us, that we have lost perspective on what it means to be rooted to a place and to patiently learn its wisdom over the course of generations. Our sense of the big cycles of history and nature is skewed.

We often talk about average precipitation, for instance, as if that's the way it has always been, but our “averages” are based on a 30-year rolling cycle. We know that there have been much drier periods over the last 2,000 years than the last 30, with dramatic shifts in vegetation and wildlife and human populations as a result.

This is the vast sweep of history, the elemental forces beyond our control that affect our lives more than anything. Yet we all have friends who

are sure the “drought” is over after one good rain or one good ski season.

Researchers who have spent entire careers studying forests in the western U.S. are still arguing over what natural, pre-settlement conditions were like. After decades of industrial logging and artificial fire suppression they would like to restore forests to a more natural condition, but can't agree on what that looks like.

I had a recent discussion with some colleagues about how Native hunting and fires and other traditional activities on the land are part of the natural ecological condition that European settlers found in North America.

The next day I argued with a conservationist friend who disagreed and felt that “natural” means without peo-

ple, and that Indians were just earlier immigrants, no more native than the family crossing the border today.

Who is a local and who is a newcomer? I don't have any answers, but I believe it has more to do with whether you are committed to a place over enough generations to learn and adapt to its rhythms, how gently you live on the land and simply whether your lifestyle is sane and sustainable enough to endure the test of time. That's more important than how many years you have been here.

We should all become local.

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